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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which children's moral judgment of aggressive acts varies by grade level, sex, race, and two dimentions of situational context -- namely, the type of aggression and the presence and type of mitigation. Subjects were 24 first grade and 24 sixth grade students. Within each grade level there were six child subgroups of black males, black females, white males, and white females. Subjects were exposed to a physically aggressive act and to a verbally aggressive act, and then to the same acts with each of 3 mitigating circumstances attached to them. One mitigation described the aggressive act as being performed to prevent an accident; the other two described the aggressive act as resulting from a physical and a verbal provocation. Following this session, each child was asked to either assign punishment to the performer of the aggression or to indicate that no punishment should be assigned. Results showed that all three mitigations reduced the level of punishment below that assigned to the unmitigated aggressive acts: accident prevention produced the greatest reduction, and provocation produced lesser reductions. This pattern held across grade level, sex, race, and types of aggression. Physical aggression was punished more severely than verbal aggression when there was no mitigating circumstance. Under mitigating conditions, however, there were no type-of-aggression differences. Finally, in all conditions, first graders assigned more severe punishment than did sixth graders. These results suggest that contrary to Piaget's theory, children as young as 6 years old can respond to and differentiate among various forms of mitigating circumstances in making moral judgments. (Author/MP)

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FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILDREN'S MORAL EVALUATIONS OF AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

SUBJECTS WERE 40 PUPILS AT A BUFFALO, NEW YORK, SCHOOL; THERE WERE 5 CHILDREN IN EACH OF 8 SUBGROUPS CREATED BY THE FACTORIAL COMBINATIONS OF GRADE LEVEL (1st VS. 6th), SEX, AND RACE (BLACK VS. WHITE). THE EXPERIMENTER DESCRIBED A PHYSICALLY AGGRESSIVE ACT AND A VERBALLY AGGRESSIVE ACT, AND THEN THE SAME ACTS WITH EACH OF 3 MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES ATTACHED TO THEM. ONE MITIGATION DESCRIBED THE AGGRESSIVE ACTS AS BEING PERFORMED TO PREVENT AN ACCIDENT; THE OTHER TWO DESCRIBED THE AGGRESSION AS RESULTING FROM A PHYSICAL AND A VERBAL PROVOCATION. FOLLOWING EACH OF THESE 8 DESCRIPTIONS, THE CHILD ASSIGNED A PUNISHMENT TO THE PERFORMER OF THE AGGRESSION OR INDICATED THAT NO PUNISHMENT SHOULD BE ASSIGNED. RESULTS: ALL THREE MITIGATIONS REDUCED THE LEVEL OF PUNISHMENT BELOW THAT ASSIGNED TO THE UNMITIGATED AGGRESSIVE ACTS; ACCIDENT PREVENTION PRODUCED THE GREATEST REDUCTION, AND PROVOCATION PRODUCED LESSER REDUCTIONS. THIS PATTERN HELD FOR BOTH GRADE LEVELS, BOTH SEXES, BOTH RACES, AND BOTH TYPES OF AGGRESSION. PHYSICAL AGGRESSION WAS PUNISHED MORE SEVERELY THAN VERBAL AGGRESSION WHEN THERE WAS NO MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCE; UNDER MITIGATING CONDITIONS, HOWEVER, THERE WERE NO TYPE-OF-AGGRESSION DIFFERENCES. FINALLY, IN ALL CONDITIONS, FIRST GRADERS ASSIGNED MORE SEVERE PUNISHMENT THAN DID SIXTH GRADERS. IMPLICATIONS: (A) THE RESULTS SUGGEST THAT, CONTRARY TO PIAGET'S THEORY, CHILDREN AS YOUNG AS 6 YEARS OLD CAN RESPOND TO AND DIFFERENTIATE AMONG VARIOUS FORMS OF MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES IN MAKING MORAL JUDGMENTS. (B) THE FORM -- PHYSICAL OR VERBAL -- WHICH AN AGGRESSIVE ACT TAKES IS A FAR WEAKER INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S MORAL EVALUATIONS OF AGGRESSION THAN ARE THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE ACT. (C) IN HEAVILY URBAN, VIOLENCE-SATURATED CULTURES, CHILDREN MAY DEVELOP AN INCREASINGLY APPROVING, OR AT LEAST NEUTRAL, MORAL STANCE TOWARD AGGRESSION AS THEY GROW OLDER. THIS DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE THE CASE IN LESS VIOLENCE-FILLED CULTURES; SAMPLES TAKEN FROM SMALLER, MORE "PEACEFUL" CITIES THAN BUFFALO, NEW YORK, HAVE PRODUCED EITHER NO AGE EFFECTS OR AGE EFFECTS SIMILAR TO OURS ONLY UNDER CERTAIN CONDITIONS.

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INTRODUCTION

Piaget (1965) hypothesized that young children base their moral evaluations of an act on the consequences of that act, rather than on the actor's intentions or on the situation in which the act takes place. Only after ages eight or nine would the child cease to base his/her moral judgments primarily on consequences, according to Piaget. This hypothesis has received some empirical support (Gutkin, 1972; Hebble, 1971). Some research, however, has produced contradictory evidence suggesting that children as young as five or six are able to take into account situations and intentions when making moral judgments (e.g., Costanzo, Coie, Grumet, & Farnill, 1973).

In the domain of moral evaluations of aggressive behavior, one aspect of the situational context which has been explored is the presence or absence of mitigating circumstances. These are conditions which make an otherwise reprehensible act, such as aggression, more "excusable" and therefore more acceptable. In a recent study, Darley, Klosson, and Zanna (1978) have shown that for children and adults alike, an aggressive act committed under mitigating circumstances is viewed more favorably than the same act committed without mitigation. This increase in favorability was greatest when the mitigation was "necessity" (e.g., aggression performed to prevent an accident); "provocation" (e.g., name-calling) and "public duty" (e.g., enabling others to take a turn on a swing) produced smaller increases in the favorability of aggressive acts. Unfortunately, Darley et al.'s

comparisons were confounded; each of several aggressive behaviors being evaluated was associated with a different mitigating circumstance.

Research into developmental effects on the weighing of mitigations and similar circumstances has produced inconsistent results. Darley et al. and Rule, Nesdale, and McAra (1974) failed to find any age differences in evaluations of aggression. Suls and Kalle (1978) found a main effect for age, older children evaluating aggressive acts more favorably than younger children. Still other studies have found age X condition interactions (Hewitt, 1975; Rule & Duker, 1973). These interactions support Piaget's hypothesis, showing that as children grow older, they become increasingly capable of taking contextual information into account when passing judgment on aggressive acts.

Another variable which might influence moral evaluations of aggression, but which to our knowledge only one previous study has examined (Shantz & Voydanoff, 1973), is the form of the aggressive act (i.e., whether it is physical or verbal). Adults have been found to respond less aggressively to verbal than to physical attacks (Hicks & Lathrop, 1968), and parents seem to encourage their children to respond differentially to the two types of aggression (Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957). Shantz and Voydanoff found that with increasing age, children responded less negatively to verbal than to physical aggression, but only when the provocation for the aggressive act was intentional, rather than accidental. The effect of type of aggression on moral evaluations thus appears to be limited by age and situational factors.

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which children's moral judgment of aggressive acts varies by grade level, sex, race, and

two dimensions of the situational context, namely, the type of aggression and the presence and type of mitigation. The methodological contribution of the study was in eliminating the confounding of aggressive acts and their associated mitigations which was present in the Darley et al. and some other studies (e.g., Rule et al., 1974). Finally, by making type of aggression and mitigation within-subjects factors, we created situations wherein subjects had to consider both factors simultaneously. Such a design allows a direct comparison of the relative influences of these two variables.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 24 first-grade and 24 sixth-grade pupils attending a Buffalo, New York, "magnet" school. Within each grade level, there were 6-child subgroups of black males, black females, white males, and white females. All children participated with written parental consent.

Family income data were not available. Children from families with sufficient need -- defined as a function of family income and number of dependents -- were eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches, however. Eleven of the 22 first-graders whose files could be located -- three black males, two black females, two white males, and four white females -- were on a lunch plan; eleven of the sixth-graders whose files could be located -- three black males, four black females, two white males, and two white females -- were on a lunch plan. Thus the groups were fairly well balanced on this estimate of socioeconomic level.

No standardized test scores were available for the first-grade children. Twenty-one sixth-graders had taken the Cognitive Abilities Test;

the mean percentile score was 51.4 (range = 12-90). Twenty-two sixth-graders had taken the Iowa Test of Basic Skills; the mean percentile score was 45.77 (range = 1-85).

Experimenters and punishment scale

The experimenters were two undergraduate students, one female and one male. Each tested an equal number of first- vs. sixth-grade, male vs. female, and black vs. white subjects, in one-to-one sessions.

The punishment scale consisted of a row of five yellow rectangles, arranged in order of increasing size from left to right. A white square, indicating "no punishment," was isolated to the left of the scale. Punishment level was assigned by placing a drawing of a child in the square or one of the five rectangles. The sex of the child in the picture was unspecified and was not clear from the drawing.

Procedure

Punishment scale training. Experimental sessions lasted approximately 10 minutes per subject, five for scale training and five for story presentation. During scale training, the experimenter asked a series of questions; if the subject failed to give an appropriate answer, the experimenter repeated the instructions or rephrased the question. The experimenter began by pointing to the display of rectangles and saying, "Let's have a look at this. Do you know what a scale is?" Most subjects either said nothing or said that a scale was something to weigh things on. The experimenter then continued, "A scale is something that goes from small to large. Can you show me the biggest rectangle? The smallest? The middle-sized one?" All subjects correctly pointed out the different-sized rectangles. The experimenter then said, "I'm going to tell you a story. It's a story about a child, and this

child may, or may not, do something which is not quite OK. Can you give me an example of something that is not quite OK to do?" If the subject failed to give an appropriate answer, the experimenter gave further prompts, such as "Tell me something it's not OK to do at school" or "Tell me something you get yelled at for by your teacher." Once an appropriate response had been given, the experimenter said, "Now after I tell you the story about the child, I'm going to ask you if you think what the child did is OK or not OK. If you think it is not OK, you will tell me how much punishment the child should get."

The experimenter then explained how the child was to respond. First, the experimenter asked the child to indicate the biggest and the smallest punishments he/she could think of, and told the child that the largest and the smallest rectangles, respectively, stood for these punishments. The experimenter also explained that the other rectangles stood for punishments in between the biggest and smallest punishments. The subject was also told that the white square meant that the child in the story should receive no punishment at all. Finally, it was explained that the drawing of the child should be placed in the square or one of the rectangles to indicate level of punishment.

Story presentation. In each story, the aggressor was referred to simply as "a child" (sex unspecified); the subject was always given the part of the victim.

The subject first assigned a punishment for either a physically aggressive act -- "A child knocks you down on purpose" -- or a verbally aggressive act, "A child yells at you really bad." Once this punishment had been

assigned, the subject was told, "I didn't tell you the whole story" and was then asked to assign a punishment to the same aggressive act with a mitigation attached (e.g., "A child yells at you really bad because, etc."). The mitigations were (a) necessity ("because you were about to get hit by a car"), (b) physical provocation ("because you shoved the child on purpose"), and (c) verbal provocation ("because you called the child 'stupid'"). The order of presenting the mitigations was counterbalanced with a Latin-square design within each grade X sex X race subgroup. The type of aggression -- physical or verbal -- which the child evaluated first was also counterbalanced. In all cases, however, the unmitigated aggressive act was evaluated first, and then re-evaluated with the mitigations attached.

Finally, the subject was asked to repeat the last story he/she had heard, as a check on the subject's attention. All but six first-graders and one sixth-grader gave what was judged to be the correct gist of the story.

Scoring, design, and analyses. Scores for each story ranged from 0 (no punishment) to 5 (the most severe punishment the child could imagine). The basic design was 2 (grade levels) X 2 (sexes) X 2 (races) X 2 (types of aggression) X 4 (mitigating circumstance conditions). Mitigation condition and type of aggression were within-subject factors.

The overall analysis contained all the factors listed above, as well as experimenter as a between-subjects factor. As indicated in Procedure, the unmitigated aggressive acts were always presented before the mitigated aggressive acts. Therefore, in addition to the overall analysis, two further analyses were performed, neither of which contained experimenter as a factor; these were an analysis for evaluations of the unmitigated acts, and an analysis for evaluations of the mitigated acts.

RESULTS

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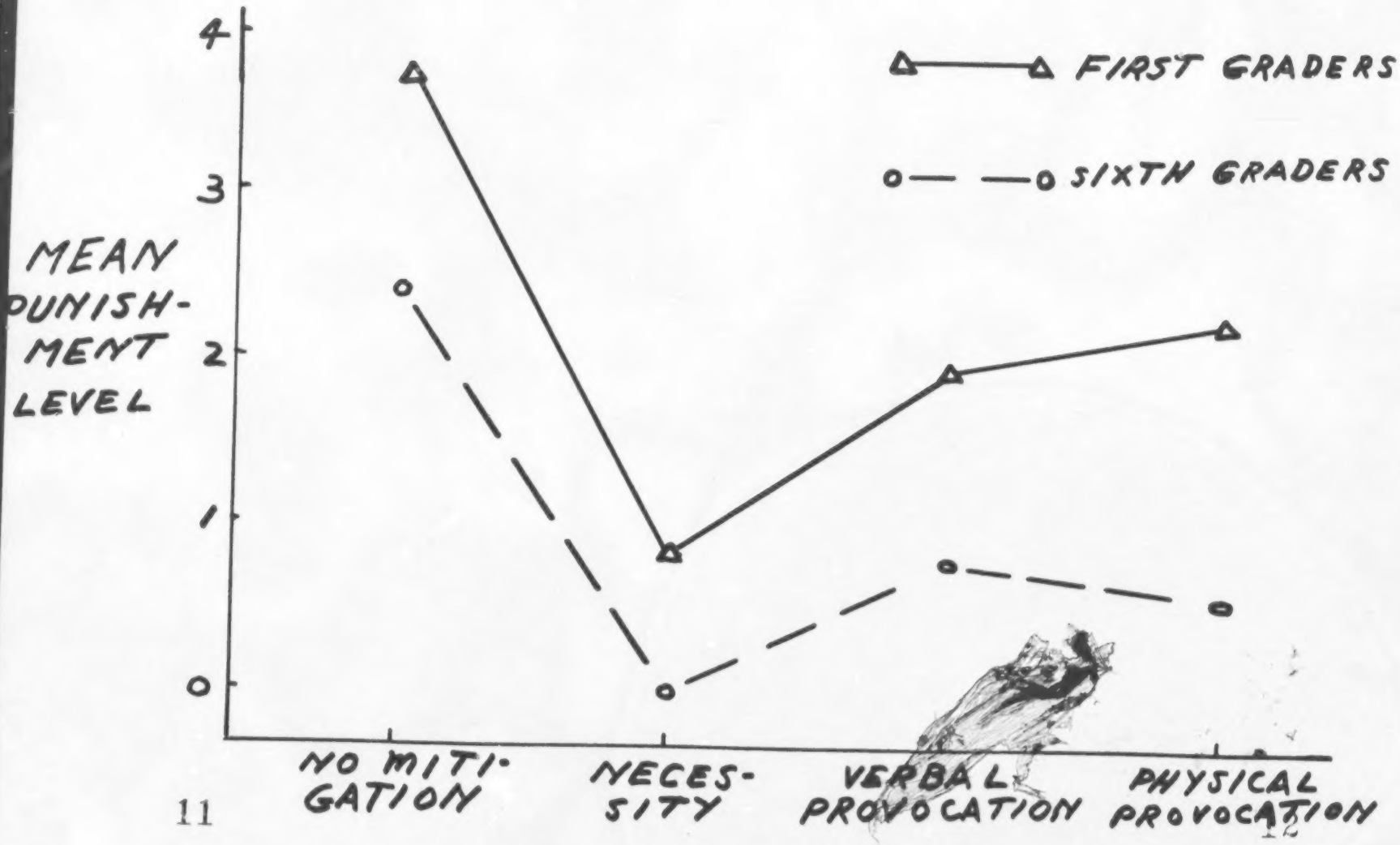
The analysis of the evaluations of unmitigated aggressive acts produced a highly significant MAIN EFFECT FOR GRADE LEVEL, $F(1,40) = 14.95$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .19$ (.26 for between-subjects factors only). FIRST GRADERS ASSIGNED A MEAN PUNISHMENT LEVEL OF 3.75, SIXTH GRADERS A MEAN LEVEL OF 2.35. The MAIN EFFECT FOR TYPE OF AGGRESSION was also significant, $F(1,40) = 6.64$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$ (.13 for within-subjects factors only). THE PHYSICAL AGGRESSIVE ACT RECEIVED A MEAN PUNISHMENT LEVEL OF 3.35. THE VERBAL AGGRESSIVE ACT A MEAN LEVEL OF 2.75.

In the analysis of mitigated aggressive acts, the MAIN EFFECT FOR GRADE LEVEL was again highly significant, $F(1,40) = 21.42$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .15$ (.33 for between-subjects factors only). FIRST GRADERS ASSIGNED A MEAN PUNISHMENT LEVEL OF 1.92, SIXTH GRADERS A MEAN LEVEL OF .44. There was also a significant MAIN EFFECT FOR MITIGATIONS, $F(2,80) = 19.08$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .08$ (.15 for within-subjects factors only). THE MEAN PUNISHMENT ASSIGNED WITH THE NECESSITY MITIGATION WAS .42, WITH THE VERBAL PROVOCATION MITIGATION, 1.32, AND WITH THE PHYSICAL PROVOCATION MITIGATION, 1.31. The grade X mitigations interaction was weak but also significant, $F(2,80) = 3.42$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$. A Tukey's post hoc test, with critical values of .65 and .87 for the .05 and .01 levels respectively, indicated that for all mitigations, first graders assigned more severe punishments than did sixth graders. For the first graders, the necessity mitigation elicited significantly less punishment than either of the provocation mitigations. For sixth graders, the necessity mitigation elicited less punishment than verbal provocation, but the difference between necessity and physical provocation failed to reach significance.

FIG. 1


4
3
2
1
0
MEAN PUNISH-MENT LEVEL
FIRST GRADERS
SIXTH GRADERS
NO MITI-GATION
NECES-SITY
VERBAL PROVOCATION
PHYSICAL PROVOCATION
MITIGATION CONDITION

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DISCUSSION

The major findings of this study warrant attention from several points of view. First, the results suggest that when children have no basis other than the nature of an aggressive act on which to make a judgment, they will evaluate physical aggression more negatively than verbal aggression. In contrast to Shantz and Voydanoff's (1973) results, we found that this physical/verbal aggression differentiation did not vary with age. As a determinant of moral judgments, however, the relative sizes of the η^2s (eta) in our results suggest that type of aggression is a minor factor in comparison to the presence and type of mitigation. Further, our results suggest that when children are asked to make evaluations based on both the nature of and the mitigating circumstances surrounding an aggressive act, they consider mitigation to the exclusion of the form the aggression takes. This pattern is similar to Shantz and Voydanoff's finding that situational factors moderate the effects of type of aggression.

Second, our results support that body of literature which shows that children as young as six or seven years old can evaluate aggression based on mitigating circumstances (e.g., Darley et al., 1978). It is difficult to interpret the significant grade X mitigations interaction we found; it is a very weak effect as compared with the main effect for mitigation, and the interaction may have been due to floor effects. This is because for sixth-graders, mitigations produced very nearly zero (no punishment) mean ratings; it is quite possible, especially in the necessity mitigation condition, that some subjects would have assigned rewards to the aggressor, had this option been available to them. Taken at face value, however, the interaction suggests that first-graders make clearer differentiations among types of

The 6-way analysis -- 2 (grade levels) X 2 (sexes) X 2 (races) X 2 (experimenters) X 2 (types of aggression) X 4 (mitigation conditions) -- indicated that the experimenter factor had a negligible influence. A 3-way and a 5-way interaction, as well as the 6-way interaction, including the experimenter factor were significant; the η^2s, however, ranged from .0007 to .0011. These effects will not be considered further. The 3-way interaction of grade X race X type of aggression was weak but also significant, F (1, 40) = 4.91, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .005$. A Tukey's post hoc test, with a critical value of .67 for the .05 level, revealed that for first graders rating verbal aggression, blacks gave less severe punishments than did whites, whereas no other race differences were significant. The very small η^2 for this interaction, and the fact that it is a .05 level effect among a total of 63 effects in this analysis, suggest that this interaction may be a chance finding.

The strongest findings in this analysis were, again, GRADE LEVEL, F (1,40) = 24.02, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .12$ (.36 for between-subjects factors only) and MITIGATION CONDITION, F (3, 120) = 79.64, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .30$ (.45 for within-subjects factors only). The MEAN PUNISHMENT LEVEL ASSIGNED WITH NO MITIGATION WAS 3.05, WITH THE NECESSITY MITIGATION, .42, WITH THE VERBAL PROVOCATION MITIGATION, 1.32, AND WITH THE PHYSICAL PROVOCATION MITIGATION, 1.31. A Tukey's post hoc test revealed that all grade level comparisons were significant, and that the means for the no-mitigation, necessity, and provocation conditions all differed significantly from one another. THE GRADE X MITIGATION INTERACTION WAS NOT SIGNIFICANT.

Figure 1 summarizes the grade level and mitigation effects. What the figure is most intended to illustrate is the essential parallel between first and sixth graders in their responsiveness to mitigating circumstances.

mitigation than do sixth-graders. However one interprets them, our mitigation results certainly do not support Piaget's hypothesis that children younger than eight or nine years old will not take situational factors into account in making their moral judgments. Finally, our results are especially convincing in adding strength to the evidence for mitigation effects in children, since our methodology eliminated the possibility that a confounding of aggressive acts and their associated mitigations had produced an artifactual result.

The most strikingly unique feature of our results are the effects for grade level, which were consistent across races, sexes, mitigations, and types of aggression. This pattern of younger children applying more negative evaluations to aggressive acts than do older children has, in earlier studies, either failed to emerge at all (e.g., Rule et al., 1974), or has been found only under certain conditions. Shantz and Voydanoff (1973), for example, found decreasing retaliatory aggression with age for accidental aggression only, not for provoked aggression. Rule and Duker (1973) similarly found that 12-year-old children were more lenient in their evaluations of aggression than were 8-year-olds only when the consequences of the aggression were serious rather than minor. Even Suls and Kalle (1978), who found a main effect for grade level, also found a grade X damage X age of aggressor interaction.

Perhaps the most relevant comparison to our results are those of Darley et al. (1978), since we used their scaling procedure and methodology essentially unaltered. Darley et al. failed to find any effects involving age, but found substantially the same mitigation effects as we did. One possibility which might account for the inconsistent age effects is a difference between subject pools. The Darley et al. study was conducted in Princeton, New Jersey. Questions addressed to the senior author revealed the following (Darley, Note 1):

1. Princeton is "a rather well-to-do town. . .low in violent crime rate." Although it is within 20 miles of larger cities, and within 50 miles of Philadelphia and New York City, Princeton's population is about 30,000, "predominantly white and solidly middle class."

2. Darley et al.'s sample was from a school in an "upper middle class section of the town." There was a very small proportion of blacks in the sample.

3. Regarding likely exposure to violence, Darley says that although "the local news from New York and Philadelphia is heavily into death and violence," it was judged doubtful that "many of our children have any direct experience with violence."

This picture contrasts sharply with our Buffalo, New York, sampling. Buffalo is a major city (about 420,000 people), with a very deteriorated inner city area and a largely poor or working class population. At least one major news story a week centers on violence within the city or its immediate environs. Although our sample may not have been exposed to any more media presentation of violence than Darley et al.'s, we do suspect that our sample has had more direct exposure to violence, either through observation or involvment. Moreover, we suspect that in our sample as compared with Darley et al.'s, violence reported in the news is more likely to be violence which has occurred in the children's own neighborhoods. Finally, our sample was half white and half black, and the school lunch plan data suggest that we had a large proportion of children from below-median-income or multiple-dependent families.

Comparing our data with those of Darley et al. and other studies leads us to the following hypothesis: Children in relatively violence-saturated areas come to view aggression as an increasingly acceptable form of behavior. This

growing acceptance of aggression does not eliminate the weighing of other considerations, such as the form of the aggression or the mitigating circumstances surrounding it, but aggression does become increasingly acceptable independent of other factors which affect moral judgments. The corollary of this hypothesis is that in areas where children's socialization provides lesser degrees of exposure to violence, aggression either fails to become more morally acceptable with age, or does so only in the presence of (i.e., in interaction with) other value-influencing conditions. We intend to perform a test of this hypothesis by replicating the present study in suburban and rural schools located at increasingly distant points from Buffalo. Another relevant comparison would be to contrast samples, controlled for population, race, mean income, etc., from areas known as "subcultures of violence" (Scherer, Abeles, & Fischer, 1975, pp. 200-203) and areas not so characterized.

Reference Note

1. Darley, J. M. Personal communication, March 10, 1980.

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